

Chairman's Corner – July 2005
Tactile Graphics Project, Richard Ladner

TO: UW Foundation, Campaign Cabinet, Deans, Development & Alumni Staff
FROM: William H. Gates, Chair, UW Foundation

Dear Friends,

Last May, as I sat in Reagan National Airport waiting for a flight back to Seattle, a distinguished-looking fellow walked up and introduced himself as Richard Ladner, UW professor of computer science and engineering. He was there, I learned, because he had just received a Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring. In our airport conversation, I learned enough about his work with the blind to want to know more. So he scheduled a session for me a few weeks later—a fascinating introduction to the Tactile Graphics Project.

Here's the problem: turning text into Braille is now a fairly simple and automated process, but turning graphics (charts, graphs, diagrams) into Braille is still largely handwork, incredibly challenging and time-consuming. And if you're a science or engineering student, a lot of what you need to learn is in those charts, graphs, and diagrams. This is a major impediment for talented blind students who want to learn and work in these fields.

The Tactile Graphics team—faculty, staff, and students from several areas, led by Professor Ladner—is working to develop a computerized, standardized, automated approach to the production of Braille graphics. This requires, said one of the team members I met, “a lot of science and a lot of ingenuity.” And nobody else in the country is doing it, although there is widespread recognition of the need. The team is currently working on the graphics in a computer-science textbook and will then move on to an astrophysics text. They have already produced the first Braille maps of the UW campus.

I was delighted and moved by the blind students who participate in the project. They are a sharp, engaging, and determined bunch: Nicole and Lindsey, high-school students; Zach, a UW math major; and Sangyun, Professor Ladner's doctoral student and the inspiration and prime mover of the project. Their stake in the project's success is obvious. And the door to science and technology will be open to many more such students when the Tactile Graphics Project has done its work.

I never cease to be surprised by the remarkable things going on here. A chance encounter in the airport leads to another revelation. This particular revelation includes, for me, not only the breakthroughs promised by Professor Ladner's project, but also the extraordinary level of support the UW already gives its handicapped students—from financial aid, to customized personal assistance (such as printing Braille texts), to the long row of specially modified computers in Mary Gates Hall. We can all be proud of

working for a university that has a heart as well as brains. Thank you for your ongoing help.

Bill

Looking Back

- At the end of this fiscal year June 30, 2005, our total **Campaign giving since July 1, 2000, reached \$1,413,330,765** toward our Campaign goal of \$2 billion.
- The June 2005 Report of Contributions Notes is attached and contains fundraising details.

Looking Ahead

- **Friday, September 9, 2005**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, September 9, 2005**, Fourth Annual Recognition Gala, Suzzallo Library.
- **Friday, January 27, 2006**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, April 28, 2006**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m., coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting. Washington Weekend April 27-29, 2006.
- **Friday, September 8, 2006**, Foundation Board Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m., coffee, 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, September 8, 2006**, Fifth Annual Recognition Gala, Suzzallo Library.